Researching Drug Sellers: An 'experiential' account from 'the field'

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Abstract

Ethnographic research techniques are well regarded as a way to elicit detailed understandings of human interaction. They are particularly useful for examining 'deviant' cultures and the dynamics of illegal activity. Though, ethnographic research on illegal activity can be 'messy'. This paper reports some practical and ethical issues encountered while carrying out an ethnographic study of drug use and drug selling among 'rave' dance participants in London. In particular it addresses the issue of using friendship to assist the research relationship and the use of a semi-covert style of research. Connected to this, it touches on the emotional work of the fieldworker whilst undertaking 'sensitive' research. It makes a timely contribution to discussions of 'reflexivity' in the research process, as well as the discourse on social sciences research governance. It argues the standardized codes of ethical conduct can not easily be translated to ethnographic research on criminal activity, such as drug use and drug selling.

Keywords: *Drugs; Ethical Dilemmas; Ethnography; Reflexivity*

Ethnographic research and reflexivity

1.1 Ethnographic research techniques are long established and are well regarded as a way to elicit detailed understandings of human interaction. They are particularly useful for examining 'deviant' cultures and the dynamics of illegal activity. Here, more formalized research approaches can raise feelings of suspicion and mistrust, and are more likely to generate reactions of non-co-operation (Tunnell, 1998; Winlow *et al*, 2001). Sitting down with an active drug seller, or burglar with pen poised ready to record detail of illicit operations, has the potential to close a study down before it has even begun. Other ways of working are required, and the freedom the ethnographic enterprise offers is valuable.

1.2 It is the case though that ethnographic research, especially that concentrating on illegal activity, can be a 'messy' business (Hobbs, 1988; Pearson, 1993). This is as the researcher seeks to locate him/herself within the social milieu of the group; to establish 'close' relations and observe human activity as it occurs in its natural setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The term 'ethnography' is assigned to many types of qualitative research and ethnographic studies exist in many forms (Pearson,

1992; Armstrong, 1993; Hobbs, 2001). Lofland (1995) notes the variation stating 'there may be as many forms of ethnography as there are ethnographers' (*ibid.*: 30). Here, I am referring to studies which follow in the ethnographic tradition of the 'Chicago School' of the 1930s and 1940s. The classic studies of urban and social life that emerged from the University of Chicago's Sociology Department have been the influence behind many revered studies in the field of sociology, criminology and urban sociology (Cressey, 1932; Whyte, 1955, Polsky, 1967 [1998], Bourgois, 1995; Maher, 1997; Hobbs *et al*, 2003 among others). The rich textual accounts produced from close observation styles provide enhanced understandings of complex social interactions and processes. For example, Cressey's research (1932), located within the 'taxi-dance halls' of Chicago city in the 1920s, gained a deep insight into this sexualised entertainment industry. Through nuanced detail, Cressey highlighted the 'mutual exploitation' that existed between the women working in the dance halls and the men utilizing the space and services offered.

1.3 Indeed, ethnography has been highly relevant in the study of illicit drugs cultures (Power, 1989, 2001). The illegal nature of drug activity means dealings are clandestine and detail surrounding their occurrence can be difficult to obtain. A number of respected drugs ethnographies have employed these techniques and provide important understandings of the dynamics of illegal drug markets and cultures (Preble and Casey, 1969; Adler, 1985; Johnson *et al*, 1985; Williams, 1989; Inciardi *et al*, 1993; Bourgois, 1995, among others). Maher's (1997) study, undertaken on the streets of Brooklyn with female sex workers, elaborated on the hierarchical structure of the drugs market and the harsh street-level position the sex workers occupied. In the face of the cruel realities of the drugs and sex market, Maher noted the supportive social networks that were established among the women.

1.4 The value yielded from rich detailed accounts is recognized, but reflexive commentary from some studies reveal the inherent contradictions within the ethnographic role and the borderline situations that can sometimes be faced. For example, Winlow *et al*, (2001) discuss how the ethnographer employed in their study took on the job of a nightclub 'bouncer'. This was to get close to the real life action of violence in the night-time economy, but in doing so, he was faced with having to engage in violence himself. Winlow *et al*'s account draws attention to the complex ethical and moral issues that can arise when undertaking research on 'sensitive' and 'hidden' activities. Moreover, 'experiential' accounts highlight the way textbook guidance and Research Ethics Committee's codes of conduct fail to take into account the complicated dynamics that are an everyday feature of ethnographic research (Winlow *et al*, 2001; Israel and Hay, 2006).

1.5 This paper draws on field experiences from my doctoral research into drugs market organization within the London rave dance culture. The study followed in the tradition of the 'Chicago School' (Anderson, 1923; Cressey, 1932). It centred on the organizational features of the drugs trade and involved participant observation in nightclubs, dance parties, pubs and bars, and in private settings among friendship group networks. This paper discusses some of the practical and ethical issues encountered while carrying out the study. Specifically it addresses the issue of using friendship to assist the research relationship and the use of a semi-covert style of research. These discussions are bound up within considerations of research ethics and can be framed within the conceptualization put forward by Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000) of 'danger in the field'. In addition to pointing out considerations of personal safety, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle referred to issues of 'ethical and professional danger'.

1.6 The paper adds to the body of literature providing 'experiential' accounts from the field. It makes a timely contribution to the current discussions of 'reflexivity' in the research process. An important contribution is also made to the discourse on social science research governance and the tightening of ethical procedures. Studies undertaken on 'sensitive' topics are becoming increasingly difficult to carry out as the governance of social sciences research takes on an ever more intensified 'risk-assessment' approach (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Israel, 2004; Israel and Hay, 2006). This paper argues along the same lines as Liebling and Stanko (2001), that the standard codes of ethical conduct can not be easily translated to ethnographic research on criminal activity, such as drug use and drug selling.

Rave dance culture

2.1 From the late 1980s through the 1990s the rave dance drugs culture was a central youth leisure scene in the UK. Going out clubbing and taking drugs was an integral part of this leisure culture. A knock on effect of the widespread drug use that was occurring, was the large numbers of people involved in the sale and exchange of illegal drugs (Collin, 1997). Whether or not they perceived themselves as 'dealers', the drug selling activity of many was of a style which constituted 'drugs dealing'.

2.2 With the exception of a few studies, analysis of the revenue raising activities associated with the rave dance culture such as the trade in ecstasy tablets, cocaine and other psycho-stimulant drugs are limited (Pearson and Hobbs, 2001; Pearson, 2007). Various cultural interpretations on the significance and meaning of the rave dance culture for the lives of those involved have emerged (Thornton, 1995; Pini, 2001). These included experiential accounts of 'going clubbing', patterns of club drug use, and the internal organization of nightclub security teams (Malbon, 1999; Hammersley *et al*, 2002; Silverstone, 2003; Sanders, 2005), yet little attention was paid to the revenue raising and economic activity connected to this night-time leisure culture. My study addressed this gap. It provided a macro and micro organizational view of drugs purchasing and selling within the London rave dance drugs culture. Specifically it examined the different ways in which drug selling roles were organized and enacted within public, anonymous settings such as nightclubs and dance parties, and within familiar friendship and social networks. The role women played in the drug selling process, and the way people's involvement in drug selling shifted over time, were also central themes of the study.

Research methods and sampling

2.3 Ethnographic 'participant observation' was utilized as the main study method. 'Participant observation' has been described by Lofland and Lofland (1995) as:

'the process in which an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long-term relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of that association' (*ibid.*: 18).

2.4 In the case of my study, this involved locating myself over an extended time period (1993-1998) in London nightclubs, dance parties, bars and pubs and people's houses. Here, the social interactions and processes at the heart of rave dance drugs exchange were observed. I was a member of the rave dance drugs culture when my study commenced. With this, I was friends with people whose social and leisure lives were embedded within the 'clubbing' scene. These people became a focus of my study and assisted my networking with others similarly involved. A number of ethnographers have recounted how their research enquiry stemmed from a position of involvement within the culture under study, and how this approach can enhance contact with what can be difficult groups to access (Hobbs, 1988). Armstrong (1993) mentions his involvement in the football hooligan culture he went on to study. Hobbs (2001) observes the way personal life and personal biographies often overlap with ethnographic study interests and assist access to 'deviant groups':

'In ethnographic studies, method and biography often merge in a reflexive soup of experiential reflection, and it is not uncommon for ethnographers to utilize their own biographies in order to gain and maintain access to deviant groups (Hobbs, 2001: cited in Silverstone, 2003: 7).

2.5 Thus, rather than people being systematically recruited to my study, they were drawn in, through their being a part of the friendship circle to which I was attached. In using a 'networking' approach, many people were a part of the study. If the sample is contained to those who formed the main focus, roughly 50 people were a part. Loosely these belonged to six different friendship groups. From the larger sample, six people were engaged in an in-depth research relationship, based on their central role in drug selling activity.

2.6 The six friendship groups were comprised of both males and females, were of mixed ages and ethnicities and were made up of people of different occupational status. These included University and other vocational training students, self-employed trades people, and people in well paid professional

occupations. Most were in either short or long term love relationships and no-one had children.

2.7 In the following paragraphs I lay out some of the practical and ethical dilemmas I faced in utilizing the informal and 'close' ethnographic style of research I drew upon.

Researching friends

2.8 In writing the methodology chapter of my doctoral thesis, I was spiritually returned to the state of 'being' I occupied while conducting my research and the sometimes complicated practical, personal and ethical dilemmas I faced not only while collecting the data, but also in the years that passed beyond the close of my study. These centre on the use of friendship to enhance the research process, and the semi-covert nature of my research style. I use the term semi-covert to explain my position, as while many of the people I was socialising alongside knew I was undertaking a study of drug selling, the long time frame at which I was located within their social worlds, meant people often forgot about my position as a researcher. They simply viewed me as a member of the friendship group to which I, and they, belonged. The problem with this less disruptive research style was many observations were made in situations where people were not fully aware their actions were the focus of my research. In endeavoring not to disturb social situations, I often did not make a point of reminding people. In this sense, my research style can be considered semi-covert in nature. The ethical issues connected to this are discussed below.

2.9 A potential area of contention with my study was that I found it more beneficial to use my position as 'a friend' to gain information, rather than setting up formal interview procedures. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, the approach of locating myself alongside the people I was researching, blending in, and examining drug use and selling activities as they occurred in their natural settings was preferable to setting up formalized research techniques (cf. Fountain, 1993). Criticisms could be directed at a research style that utilized friends as 'sources of data' (Ditton, 1977), and the complex nature of the friend/researcher relationship could be pointed to as an unethical position to occupy.

2.10 To contextualize this discussion, the work of Duncombe and Jessop (2002) can be referred to. They comment on the way friendship is used as a matter of course in feminist research, but draw attention to the powerlessness of participants within this dynamic. They note how the use of friendship in the research process can contravene codes of ethical conduct. On a more extreme note, they go on to discuss the notion of 'fake friendship' which they embed within the importance that is placed on establishing a strong rapport with participants in order to access high quality information.

2.11 They state what can result is a sense of 'fake friendship'. A key point they make here is that the friendship dynamic can remove the ability of a research participant to withdraw their consent. Moreover they point out, in using the empathetic friend status a research participant may feel they are revealing more to the researcher than they want to.

'....Interview relationships raise common ethical problems, to the extent that they encourage or persuade interviewees to explore and disclose experiences and emotions which – on reflection- they may have preferred to keep to themselves or even not to know' (*ibid.*: 120).

2.12 The notion of faking friendship cannot be applied to my research. Many of these people were genuine friends, over a number years. But in my using friendship relations to access understandings of rave dance drugs exchange, people discussed sensitive and private aspects of their leisure activities. These may not have been revealed in a more formalized and more distanced research relationship.

2.13 The above acknowledges an aspect of my research style that may have influenced people's narratives, but the notion of powerlessness within the friendship dynamic is challenged in relation to my own research. Here, it helps to explain the rave dance culture and the social context in which my study was carried out, in more detail. This was the mid 1990s and the rave drugs culture was so widespread that it was being played out in numerous settings, scenes, venues and events across the UK and London. Moreover, the rave dance drugs population incorporated people from a wide spectrum of social class backgrounds including people

from middle-class and professional backgrounds. Indeed a number of people in my study were from privileged, educated backgrounds who worked in reputed careers, or were studying in prestigious London Universities. For example, one had a career in the media industry, one worked in a financial institution in the City of London, and one was training as a medical doctor. The drugs culture that developed at this time led to the 'drugs normalization thesis', wherein the sociologist Howard Parker argued that the general acceptability of drugs in UK society, and their ubiquitous availability deemed illegal drug use almost a 'normalized' aspect of everyday life (1995). South (2004) went further and claimed that drug selling too had been added to this process of normalization.

2.14 This had a bearing on the high level of openness I experienced in respect to my enquiry and was the social reckoning that underpinned the leisure environments I was researching, and socializing within. Few people viewed themselves as doing anything out of the ordinary.

2.15 There were two fundamental features of my research which support my challenge to the notion of powerlessness within the friendship/research dynamic and the relative ease I experienced at using friends in the research process. The first was that I did not take a position of judgment in regard to the drug using and selling lifestyles I was researching and observing. I did not hold, or express any moral view. I did not have to. I was an independent academic researcher, and as such it was not necessary for me to hold a position, on the side of drugs prevention and law enforcement, nor on the side of support for drug use. Instead, I set out to represent a real life view of a specific drugs culture that had emerged in London in the mid to late 1990s. I viewed it as a recreational drugs culture that people by and large managed effectively alongside their work, domestic and study lives (cf. South, 2004). This non-judgmental approach put the people I was researching, in a situation where they could critically discuss their involvement in this drugs culture knowing their views and rationalized actions were being considered as a valuable contribution to the related debates and discourse.

2.16 Secondly, my research informants were critical enough to talk about themselves and understand their location within a so-called 'deviant' and illegal drug world. A key feature facilitating this was that they sat astride several worlds and identities; the 'deviant', illegal one being one of a number of personal identities. In sociological terms their lives could be conceived of as one of fluid and multiple identities. Theoretical constructions of late-modern society have construed our identity, or our sense of self, and our self expression as 'fluid' rather than fixed (Giddens, 1991). We are considered to occupy multiple identities attaching ourselves to different identities depending on how we wish to express ourselves. This theoretical construction is useful to understand the lives of the people I was researching. They oscillated between a so-called deviant identity in their recreational drug using worlds and conventional identities in their work, home and study lives. Indeed, I noted above how a number of them straddled conventional and successful worlds, alongside their involvement in a more 'deviant' risky world. This state of multiple identities facilitated them to place themselves outside of their deviant identities, to consider their involvement in the rave dance drugs culture as one part of their lives and to provide a critical examination of what they were doing in their leisure time pursuits.

2.17 Throughout this research, questions of ethical and moral conduct were of constant consideration (cf. Ditton, 1977; Duncombe and Jessop, 2002), but the use of friendship to facilitate understandings of this drugs culture did not present me with concerns around powerlessness, or that ethical conduct was being compromised in the way conceptualized by Duncombe and Jessop.

Semi-covert research

2.18 Whereas the potential contentions arising from researching friends is challenged in the example of my work, the use of the semi-covert research style I adopted requires discussion. I explained above that the semi-covert style my research drew upon refers to not everyone in my study being aware their drug using lives were the focus of my research. This was due to my being a part of the culture I was researching and my not unusual presence in these leisure arenas. In my desire not to upset naturally occurring activities I generally did not announce my research.

2.19 The semi-covert position, or what can otherwise be referred to as the absence of 'informed consent', was also due to it not being entirely clear to me at the time of my field observations who, or what examples, would become case studies in my written thesis. At least, not until I sat down to write it, and due to the long time frame of my study, at the point of writing some people had moved on from this lifestyle and I no longer knew where they were.

2.20 The ethics of covert research, and by its implication, the question of informed consent, have been written about by many commentators. Some have used, and support a covert style if necessary, and others vehemently disagree with the approach. While it is etiquette in social research to gain research participants' permission to include them in a study, it is also noted this can pose problems in studies of illegal activity (Lee, 1993; Tunnell, 1998; Israel and Hay, 2006). Here attention is drawn to the point that if covert methods were not employed, some activities would never successfully be studied. As some commentators assert, the decision needs to be weighed up in relation to the harm caused to the subjects, against the value of the research knowledge being drawn (Denzin, 1968; Israel and Hay, 2006). From his research with 'criminals', Tunnell (1998) argued if research subjects have not been harmed, and if the nature of the study warrants it, there is nothing wrong with using covert methods. Denzin (1968) argued the case for covert research on the basis of accumulating knowledge:

'I suggest the sociologist has the right to make observations on anyone in any setting to the extent that he does so with scientific intents and purposes in mind. The goal of any science is no willful harm to subjects, but the advancement of knowledge and explanation. Any method that moves us toward that goal, without necessary harm to subjects, is justifiable' (*ibid.*: 502).

2.21 The argument that covert methods are necessary in regard to some research enquiries can be applied to my study. This is linked to the understanding that in some situations if overt methods were used, then some activity, especially illegal activity would never successfully be studied. In order to access this level of detail on the rave dance drugs market, a semi-covert style of research was necessary.

Emotionality

3.1 Commentators on undertaking sensitive qualitative research have referred to the emotional costs incurred by the researcher (Gilbert, 2001), and reflexive accounts have drawn attention to the challenging emotionality that can be encountered during fieldwork for both researcher and those being researched (Wincup, 2001). The informal approach of using friendship relationships was a useful way to gain information, but at times it was a difficult emotional role to occupy, largely in terms of the health and legal problems experienced by those I was close to.

Risks and ethics in the field

Friends' health and safety

3.2 There were a few instances where I witnessed people experiencing serious health issues in respect to their drug use, such as an increasing drift towards an addicted style of drug use. Though I was not judgmental in respect to the drug using lifestyles of the people I was studying, it was a different story when friends' personal health and safety was at stake and I sometimes said something. There was one rather naïve young man in my study who had come to live in London from Australia. He found himself in the middle of an active circle of party people where status and recognition were especially achieved through being a source of drugs supply. The friendship group Rick^[1] was attached to was largely made up of 'temporary stay' Australian visitors to London. They were cavalier and bravado in their drug use. Rick enjoyed the attention from his role of drugs supplier but at a particular point it was evident he was running into trouble with excessive drug use and a vulnerability which saw him in increasingly risky selling situations. This involved a more public style of selling in contrast to his earlier friendship group-level activities. Myself, and a couple of other people in the friendship group drew his attention to the health and legal problems he was facing if he continued. He did become more restrained, but it was possibly boarding

the plane back to Australia that saved him from further decline.

3.3 There were others who developed a penchant for cocaine, one of whom was a key informant in my study. He was a principal influence on my accessing this culture in the first place, and was closely involved in my navigation into the club scene. As his involvement in the culture became more entrenched, so did his drug use. As a good friend, I subsequently took it upon myself to tell him I thought he was heading for problems through his excessive cocaine use. Some years later, I learned from him that he had been annoyed at my forthrightness, but said it had made him consider what he was doing. Despite this reflection, not long later he was arrested in possession of cocaine and ended up at Narcotics Anonymous dealing with his cocaine addiction.

3.4 Inciardi (1993) discusses the difficult situation of intervening while one is in the researcher role. He provided an example of a particularly difficult moment he faced when carrying out his research in crack houses in Miami. This was in wanting to intervene in the conduct occurring in one of the houses where a succession of four men were having vaginal intercourse with a 14 to 15 year old crack addicted "house girl". The protector who had vouched for Inciardi's presence in the crack house let him know, in no uncertain terms, he could not interfere without himself (Inciardi) getting hurt. The codes of conduct inside a crack house exist at a different level. My interventions were not on the same scale as that of Inciardi's. This was due to the vastly different nature of the dance drugs using culture to that of the crack use, and crack house culture. Though it does need to be added, that in certain styles of research, such as close ethnographic styles it may at times be necessary to weigh up whether to intervene and at the same time asking yourself whether it is your role?

3.5 In my being a part of this culture various personal risks were faced in regard to legal safety. I was frequently in places where drugs were being used, and bought and sold, such as in nightclubs, commercial dance parties and more intimate spaces such as bars, pubs and private parties. On a few rare occasions I was at a private home where people met to collect pre-arranged drug deals. By and large, club drug users felt safe in the fact that if the police would raid premises, with the intention of arresting those in possession of drugs, then the entire crowd would have to be arrested. More caution was taken in private arenas. I preferred not to be at someone's house where significant drug exchange was occurring unless it was a large private party and the activity was peripheral to the main party activity.

3.6 These examples illustrate some of the borderline and contradictory situations that can be faced when immersed in the world of those under study.

Friendship beyond the research field

3.7 My strategy of combining overt and covert techniques, plus using friendship to enhance the research process was at times an awkward position to locate and this difficulty crystallized at the point of leaving the 'field' to write up. I had plenty of information to produce an understanding of the different roles played out in the drug purchasing and selling process. Moreover, to engage fully in the analytic process, distance was needed between myself, the field, and my research subjects (Watson, 1999) – in my case my 'friends'. This, however, highlighted the problem with the lack of distance there had been between myself and my research subjects in the first place.

3.8 On leaving the field I felt a sense of betrayal that the friendships I had formed and nurtured over the years were being deserted. Certainly, as social beings we move on from particular friendship group associations, or styles of socializing for numerous reasons, and it was indeed the case that friendships within the rave dance culture were fickle. The concept of friends was loosely applied and many friendships were based on weak ties, underpinned by functional relationships based on the mutual acquisition and supply of ecstasy tablets, cocaine and other psycho-stimulants drugs. Despite the relative exploitation of friendship within rave dance connections, and the natural progression from certain social arenas to new ones, feelings of unease were experienced as I disappeared from the social scene. The real issue that needs to be highlighted here though was the lack of distance in the first place between myself and those I

was researching.

3.9 There is a crucial balance between 'authenticity' and 'distance', in studies of this nature: on the one hand being immersed to such a degree that one observes events as they take place in their natural settings, on the other maintaining the level of distance required to avoid 'going native' and maintain objectivity (Pearson, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Jacobs (1998), in discussing dilemmas in the field when researching 'active criminals', raised the issue of social distance which he noted was in some ways 'foreign to the ethnographic enterprise' (*ibid.*: 163). He cited Wolff (1964) who contended that 'successful fieldwork inevitably requires surrender - psychological, social and otherwise - to the setting, culture and respondents one is studying' (Jacobs, 1998: 164).

3.10 My work reveals my surrender to the setting, and undoubtedly, the challenges presented by this lack of researcher-participant distance were such that if I were to conduct a study of this nature again, I would seek to research people less known to myself. It was found throughout the research that people who were met randomly in various rave dance settings regularly offered to assist the study either themselves, or by putting me in contact with a drug selling friend. This greater sense of anonymity seemed to establish a confidence to tell their story in an open way, but importantly the blurring of friendship within the research role would be removed.

3.11 The issue of distance between myself and the people I had been studying remained complicated years after my study. On occasions I have found myself in the company of people included in my doctoral work and did not feel able to tell them they had been included. My overall reservations were related to the interpretations I had made about their drug selling roles. The interpretation I applied was different to theirs. They perceived themselves to be involved in social network drug exchange; providing drugs for their friends' nights out clubbing. In contrast, my understandings incorporated notions of 'commercial' drug selling set-ups, entrepreneurship, income generation and elements of functional relationships. I was applying a more economic explanation to rave dance drug exchange. Encounters then with some people I had included saw me editing out a part of my life as I skirted around the central place occupied by my thesis writing. One example of this was the occasion when I ran into Joe. Joe was a main character in my research. He ran a busy friendship group drug selling operation, over a couple of years. I had just one hour earlier been writing about him. This was an awkward encounter. We spent time catching up but most awkward was not feeling able to tell him about his inclusion as a case study, based on my interpretation of his drug selling role. Such an example draws attention to the difficulties that can continue to emerge years later when managing a research relationship of the type I employed. That is one which draws predominately on friendship relationships to gather information and a semi-covert style of observation.

Reflexivity and openness

4.1 Until recently accounts of the lived reality of 'sensitive' fieldwork remained private, typically exchanged among colleagues, or with doctoral supervisors behind closed doors (Liebling and Stanko, 2001). Methodologically hazy research experiences were cleansed from the published texts, to make way for the interpretation of empirical data (Pearson, 1993; Coffey, 1999). This invited criticism from within the academic world relating both to the transparency of the research process, and the limitations to which methodological procedures could be scrutinised (Watson, 1999; Coffey, 1999). More importantly, it left few insights into the complex personal, practical and emotional dynamics that underpin ethnographic research.

4.2 The importance of 'reflexivity' and analysing the research process is now ingrained within social science research and researcher's reports from 'the field' are emerging (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Wincup, 2001; Winlow *et al*, 2001; Vanderstaay, 2005). These give important impressions into what goes on behind the scenes, in the 'real' world of research. Moreover, such accounts highlight the intrinsic ambiguities that are a feature of ethnographic and qualitative research (Gilbert, 2001).

Social sciences research ethics and governance

5.1 Indeed social sciences research in the UK, and elsewhere, is being drawn into tighter governing

procedures emphasizing a more consistent approach to the management and monitoring of research. This draws heavily on models that have been implemented in the medical sciences and include concerns about the protection of research subjects 'rights, dignity and safety' (Economic and Social Research Council, 2005: 23). Along the lines of protecting research subject's rights, 'informed consent' is stressed as a necessity (British Society of Criminology, 2005). Yet it is certainly the case that strict adherence to rules surrounding informed consent can be a problem. Liebling and Stanko (2001), write in a special edition journal on researching violence: 'we are skeptical about the utility of stringent codes of conduct. Like law in the books, such codes are unlikely to apply easily to the real world in action' (*ibid.* 426).

5.2 Israel and Hay (2006) in their discussion of written informed consent and research ethics in the social sciences note an acknowledgement within ethics boards that has come about through researcher lobbying. This is that the tight rules on written consent are relaxed in some domains, specifically in areas of illegal activity where written documentation can put research subjects at risk simply through holding records of personal details (*ibid.*: 69). In the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council's latest ethical guidelines documented in the Research Ethics Framework (Economic and Social Research Council, 2007) are rigorous. Though they do give leeway in particular areas of research such as that in the field of deviance and illegal behaviour - 'when it may provide unique forms of evidence or where overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied' (*ibid.*:21).

Concluding comments

6.1 My doctoral research commenced at a point when universities imposed few regulations and formal procedures on research students' activities in the field. A research project of the type I carried out would today very likely be met with a negative response by a Research Ethics Committee. This includes those that sit within Universities where Masters and Doctoral students seek to investigate subjects of personal interest, as well as areas of social, political and cultural importance. The guidelines are increasingly cautious and as Israel and Hay (2006) state, 'appear to safeguard funding agencies, employers, Universities and others from the unethical actions of an employee and thus legal action' (*ibid.*: 2006: 6). The implications are that studies intending to examine 'sensitive' and illegal activity will be very difficult to carry out. Having said this, the method employed in my study is not the only way to find out about illegal drug use cultures. Drug users, like others, enjoy the attention the research interview provides, and are generally amenable to speaking about drug use activity. However, the depth and richness of the data generated within my study would not be elicited even within such otherwise valuable methods.

6.2 This article has highlighted some of the practical and ethical dilemmas faced while engaged in a research study utilizing ethnographic methods. A main area of difficulty was using friendship to enhance the research and the semi-covert style of research I opted for. This had implications up to the point of publication, and in the years after the close of my study. This declaration could invite the criticism of being a personal outpouring, which some reflexive accounts have been accused of (Coffey, 1999). In fact, it stands as a contribution to the knowledge of the complex dynamics and emotionality ethnographic styles of research. The life-changing impact of the research process, on the researcher's world cannot be underestimated. This is not to advocate avoiding research which hinges on risk situations, but it is to note the importance of being mindful of the complex dynamics that are an inherent feature of ethnography and the longer-term impacts research of this nature can have.

6.3 Whereas ethnographic methods can provide rich and insightful data that cannot be generated in more structured and orderly research studies, the personal difficulties associated with the 'participant observation' style of research might call into question the appeal such studies could have for future academic researchers. It might well be that studies involving this 'close' research style, which reveal rare insights into hidden worlds could be sidelined in favour of less 'messy', but perhaps less illuminating research strategies. If this is set alongside the increasingly stringent research governance (Israel, 2004; Israel and Hay, 2006) currently being witnessed in the UK which effectively restricts research activity of the nature described in this article, then this is a problem for social sciences research more generally. From my research, it is evident that the guidelines surrounding the governance of research need to be relaxed in

areas of sensitive research and research into criminal activities. Where it is important to observe ethical codes of conduct and informed consent, strict observance of these rules will mean that researchers will no longer legitimately be able to uncover the intricacies of some social behaviours, especially illegal behaviour and social sciences research will be lacking for it.

Notes

¹ For purposes of confidentiality, names have been changed.

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